

Two Centuries of Black American Art

David C. Driskell

With catalog notes by
Leonard Simon

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Introduction

Black is neither a true color nor an entirely apt word in the title for this exhibition. The artists represented were not selected because of their African ancestry alone, however direct or mixed, but to consider how this has obscured their contributions to American art history. And so it is not mere skin color that gives this survey a unity although it is true that many of the artists represented underwent uniquely personal torments because of a majority society's prejudices. Some escaped through exile: Edmonia Lewis to Rome, Henry O. Tanner to Paris, William H. Johnson to Denmark. But a larger number did not or could not. One revelation of this present assemblage is that the human creative impulse can triumph in the face of impossible odds, and at times perhaps even because of them.

One irony that tends to bear this out was an episode endured by Edward Bannister. After he had submitted his *Under the Oaks* for exhibit at the Philadelphia Centennial Exposition, it won a bronze medal. But the artist himself was nearly denied admission to the gallery displaying his work, because of his color. We are told also that Tanner's embitterment with America derived from the recognition he received not as an artist, but as a *black* artist, a kind of racial anomaly. The *real* anomaly is that our society, with few exceptions, has taken so long to recognize these gifted Americans who have strengthened the cultural fabric that cloaks and therefore enriches us all.

For those who know black American art only through contemporary exhibitions of the past decade, it will come as a surprise that

so many earlier artists did not reflect "the black experience" in their subject matter. But from their portraits of whites, biblical scenes, and landscapes that have affinities with Cole and Durand, it seems that staying close to the mainstream of American art was a way for black artists to find acceptance and commissions. Perhaps this conformity (or better, sublimation) was in itself another kind of "black experience."

This exhibition, although the largest of its type held thus far, is hardly complete. An endless regret is that many black American works have vanished, or lack documentation. Even in our own times there are few public museums with appreciable collections of black American art. Hopefully this does not reflect conscious bias as much as it does unawareness. Lamentably rare, also, are American art texts or biographical dictionaries that list even a few of the names encountered in this exhibition and catalog. One can at least be grateful that in our century pioneer institutions such as the Harmon Foundation; Atlanta, Fisk, and Howard universities; the Schomburg Collection of the New York Public Library; and the Frederick Douglass Institute, Museum of African Art, among others, began serious efforts to end the anonymity of these American artists and to encourage public awareness and appreciation of their achievements.

Although the exhibition includes a number of important works that have not, until now, been seen by a large public, there are still regrettable gaps. In some instances owners were reluctant to lend; in others, surviving

works were deemed too fragile to travel. We have already noted that some may be lost forever, including Tanner's original *Daniel in the Lions' Den*, of which a later version by his hand is in the exhibition.

This exhibition and its catalog represent extensive research, negotiation, selection, and thought by Professor David C. Driskell, chairman of the Department of Art at Fisk University. An artist himself, he is an acknowledged authority on black American art and his university is a leading repository. Assisted by Leonard Simon, Professor Driskell was presented with a mandate when invited to serve as guest curator of this exhibition: to locate a broad-ranged group of works reflecting the efforts of the more significant black American artists from slave times into the mid-twentieth century. There are some exceptions: works by living artists who, although active before 1950, asked to be represented by later examples.

When the concept of this exhibition was first generated, initial research revealed a paucity of serious literature on black American art. Part of this mandate to Professor Driskell therefore included the preparation of a catalog text capable of filling a void that has existed too long. Quite apart from its direct relationship to the exhibition and its contribution to the literature, we hope that this publication will stimulate further research and scholarship that will give us a more complete history of American art.

The Museum expresses particular appreciation to nearly one hundred lenders whose names appear on page 6. Their willingness to part with

treasured possessions for more than a year, permitting scores of thousands of museum visitors to see them in Los Angeles, Atlanta, Dallas, and Brooklyn, represents both admirable generosity and welcome enthusiasm for this project. *Two Centuries of Black American Art* could not have been organized and presented without substantial assistance from the National Endowment for the Humanities and Philip Morris Incorporated. This combination of government and corporate support has provided vital succor for the exhibition, this catalog, and a variety of related educational activities.

Rexford Stead
Deputy Director
Los Angeles County Museum of Art

The Evolution of a Black Aesthetic, 1920-1950

In the early 1920s the awakening spirit of Negritude which encouraged racial pride, a continuing interest in the civilizations of Black Africa, and a redefining of the meaning of the black experience in America stimulated black artists, musicians, writers, and academicians and laid the groundwork for that flourishing era in the arts now called the Negro Renaissance.

In Africa art had been central to man's existence, and one could not be born, come of age, marry, or die without a work of art being made to celebrate that event. Alain Locke urged black American artists to re-establish the position of art at the core of black life and to make art a liberating force for their people. It was also Locke, possibly more than any other black figure, who saw Negritude as a viable force in making the world aware of the cultural contributions that African artists had made to modern art. Of this idea he wrote:

Africa's art creed is beauty in use, vitally rooted in the crafts, and uncontaminated with the blight of the machine. Surely the liberating example of such art will be as marked an influence in the contemporary work of Negro artists as it has been in that of the leading modernists; Picasso, Modigliani, Matisse, Epstein, Lipschitz, Brancusi, and others too numerous to mention.

Indeed we may expect even more of an influence because of the deeper and closer appeal of African art to the artist who feels an historical and racial bond between himself and it. For him, it should not function as a novel pattern of eccentricity or an exotic idiom for clever yet imitative

adaptation. It should act with all the force of a sound folk art, as a challenging lesson of independent originality or as clues to the reexpression of a half-submerged race soul. African art, therefore, presents to the Negro artist in the New World a challenge to recapture this heritage of creative originality, and to carry it to distinctive new achievement in a vital, new and racially expressive art.¹

Locke felt the need for other artists to help him visualize the ideas he so firmly believed. However, before realizing these dreams, black artists would need to understand more clearly their own position in American culture, particularly their role as entertainers of the majority culture, and to comprehend the forces affecting their society.

The Great Migration of hundreds of black people to the northern urban centers after the first World War, the emergence of a black intelligentsia, and the general postwar restlessness and disillusionment of the twenties created a new militancy and radicalism among black Americans. This attitude had political and social implications that not only gave black people more self-confidence, but also fostered nationalism and stimulated efforts at self-discovery. It was the very core of the Harlem Renaissance.

Concurrent with the renaissance was a general revolution in American culture which some believe began as early as 1912 with Mabel Dodge of Greenwich Village and other white intellectuals and artists such as Carl Van Vechten, Eugene O'Neill, Midgeley Torrance, Paul Green,

Sinclair Lewis, Dorothy and DuBose Heyward, to name only a few of the more prominent. It was Mabel Dodge, a cultivated patroness of the arts, and her Greenwich Village salon group, especially Van Vechten, who established the first links with the parallel black movement in Harlem.

One critic saw this as "cultural collaboration" among black and white artists;² it was, however, simply a repetition of the established black-white dynamics, this time on a cultural plane. Collaboration would have meant granting black artists and intellectuals a social and cultural equality. Such cultural democracy would have implied, as Butcher points out, "an inescapable corollary of political and social democracy, and it [would have meant] an open door for the acceptance... and the full recognition of the minority contribution."³ This was not the intention of the white avant-garde. Instead, they made blacks a symbol of white America's search for personal freedom, an escape from conventional standards of behavior.

Nathan Huggins is convinced that the black people of Harlem had little chance to define their own identities since they had become so crucial to the identities of whites who were mesmerized by black life. Harlem appeared as a place that had

1. Alain Locke, "The African Legacy and the Negro Artist," in *Exhibition of Productions by Negro Artists* (New York: Harmon Foundation, 1931), p. 12.

2. Robert Bone, *The Negro Novel in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1958), p. 58.

3. Margaret Just Butcher, *The Negro in American Culture* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1967), p. 21.

"magically survived the psychic fetters of Puritanism."⁴ The white avant-garde found in black culture "primitive" elements that seemed vital, unspoiled, and the correct antidote to a sterile existence based on values that had become illusory. Those who portrayed black America as uncivilized, indulgent, passionate, mysterious, sexy, and savage were particularly captivated by black music and black speech. Black music was not only exotic but "instinctive and abandoned, yet, laughingly light and immediate." Black speech was "secretive, 'in', casual... fluid, impudent."⁵

Themes of black "primitivism" became popular with white artists: O'Neill's *Emperor Jones* (1920), Anderson's *Dark Laughter* (1925), Heywood's *Porgy* (1925), and Van Vechten's *Nigger Heaven* (1926), to name a few. Thus the Exotic Primitive was conceived and born from the fantasies of white America, with black America in the tacit role of midwife. There were, of course, many black entertainers and writers who exploited the situation for the benefit of white patrons. Yet some, as Langston Hughes said, were sincerely trying to express their "individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame. If white people were pleased they were glad; if they were not, it did not matter. They knew they were beautiful."⁶

This new image of the dark-skinned self was not "primitivism," but an exploration of black and ethnic identity in America, influenced by the following conditions: (1) the rising expectations of black America encouraged by the American Dream that flourished after World War I; (2)

the Garvey-inspired nationalism that gave an unprecedented dignity to the black masses; (3) the influence and power of African sculpture and black music; and (4) limited patronage from the white avant-garde.

As artists searched for an alternate value structure they discovered that the most distinctive aspects of black culture evolved from the lower classes. Consequently, for many artists the emphasis was on interpreting the folk—the rhythmic inflections of their speech, their immediate concerns, and an affirmation of the quality of black life—without necessarily pleading the cause of racial justice. Langston Hughes explains the reason for the emphasis on the black under class rather than the middle class:

There are the low-down folk, the so-called common-element... they furnish a wealth of colorful distinctive material for any artist because they still hold their own individuality in the face of American standardizations....⁷

The extent to which Hughes and others were successful in translating this concept into art has been mistakenly interpreted as a glorification of the lowest black. Even DuBois inveighed against what he perceived as undue emphasis on the black under class as subject matter at the expense of the middle class, saying vehemently, "I do not care a damn for any art that is not used for propaganda. But I do care when propaganda is confined to one side while the other side is stripped and silent."⁸ At the same time Locke implored the Harlem Renaissance artists to turn to the "ancestral arts of

Africa" if they would develop a race art. He reasoned that "if African art [were] capable of producing the ferment in modern art that it has, surely this [was] not too much to expect of its influence upon the culturally awakened [black] artist of the present generation."⁹

Three artists in particular—Palmer Hayden, Archibald Motley, Jr., and Aaron Douglas—in their search for forms and content informed by Africa developed naive and non-academic styles that reflected the new aesthetics of the twenties.

Hayden, who had once favored romantic marine subjects like *Quai at Concarneau*, demonstrated his concern for the new movement with a bit of irony that must have startled the uninitiated: an unconventional still life called *Fetich et Fleurs* (fig. 38), composed of a table covered with an African print on which were placed a vase of striking orchids, an ash tray, and a piece of African sculpture (a Fang or Pangwe reliquary head). Locke described Hayden's new style as "more modernistic... more decorative, high-keyed and in broken color."¹⁰ Hayden would later develop

4. Nathan Huggins, *The Harlem Renaissance* (New York: The Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 89.

5. Ibid.

6. Langston Hughes, "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," *The Nation*, June 23, 1926, p. 694.

7. Ibid., p. 693.

8. W. E. B. DuBois, "Criteria of Negro Art," *Crisis* (May 1926), p. 296.

9. Alain Locke, *The New Negro* (New York: Albert & Charles Boni, Inc., 1925. Reprinted Atheneum Press, 1968), p. 267.

10. Idem, *Negro Art: Past and Present* (Washington, D.C.: Associates in Negro Folk Education, 1936), p. 66.

a preference for subject matter that emphasized the mores, myths, and customs of black America from the view of a folklorist. Most of these works were painted in a semi-naïve fashion that stressed narrative, anecdotal detail in a rather self-conscious way.

Motley received approval and recognition from the majority culture in the form of a solo exhibition in New York in 1928. This event undoubtedly helped to further legitimize the primitive style among black artists since he was the first other than Tanner to have a one-man show in a commercial New York gallery. In that show, along with works in his severe, realistic style, Motley showed paintings of "fantastic compositions of African tribal and voodoo ceremonials... and broad higher-keyed and somewhat lurid color schemes with an emphasis on the grotesque and genre side of modern [black] life."¹¹ Although he later painted WPA murals Motley was better known for his meticulously rendered caricatures of black night life. Locke felt that in the canvases he painted from 1933 to 1936 with such lively titles as *The Barbecue*, *The Liar*, *Saturday Night*, and *The Chicken Shack* there was a "swashbuckling humor" about black life that was a "promising departure." By paying sharp attention to minutiae, Motley attempted to convey the spontaneous excitement of the "sweet-backs," prostitutes, and others who inhabited his Rabelaisian world.

Aaron Douglas, a "pioneer Africanist," accepted the legacy of the ancestral arts and developed an original style, unrelated to any school, that can best be described as

geometric symbolism. He combined modernism and Africanism in an astonishing synthesis, creating compositions that were spatially flat, formally abstracted, and virtually free from imitation and convention (cat. nos. 96-100). By eliminating details and reducing forms to silhouettes, he lifted everything above mere observation of the visual world. His lithe figures were stylized, yet ethnically symbolic, balanced, and harmonious; his style was an angular Art Nouveau that possessed a vitality as disconcerting as the new jazz. Unfortunately, pressure from his peers forced Douglas to use this style for murals and book illustrations only, while devoting more time to a realistic style for easel paintings. In the absence of critical interpretation to reinforce and help clarify the aesthetic and stylistic significance of Douglas' work, it is not unlikely that he, too, came to have doubts about its relevance.

These three artists who would replace *Quai at Concarneau* with *Midsummer Night in Harlem* (cat. no. 87), *My Grandmother* (cat. no. 80), and *The Barbecue*, are representative of others who came under African or Afro-American influences. The black motifs varied from the stylized copper masks of Sargent Johnson (cat. no. 69) to the expressive *The Breakaway* by Richmond Barthé. As the black artist began to make sociological rather than aesthetic decisions about his work, his imagery led him closer to aspects of atavism and an intentionally naïve style labeled primitivism. It has been suggested that primitivistic imagery appeared to be the most viable alternative to the academic, assimilationist approach

strongly favored by the middle class and exemplified by the work of Henry O. Tanner.

Since the career of Tanner, the one black American artist to gain a measure of support in the white world, overlapped the period under discussion it is important to understand his relationship to the Negro Renaissance. He was considered by most black Americans to be one of the most important painters in the world. Locke said that his career "may be truthfully said to have vindicated the [black] artist beyond question of shadow of doubt or a double standard of artistic judgment."¹² He was referring to Tanner's success as a salon painter in France, albeit after the influence and popularity of the academic tradition had waned. Mention has been made of the purchase of Tanner's work by the French government and by prominent American museums. He won awards at the Paris, Buffalo, St. Louis, and San Francisco Expositions as well as a French Legion of Honor medal. He was, indeed, the magic symbol of the African-American's artistic aspiration and achievement. Unfortunately, those aspirations still depended on the approval of the majority culture in one form or another. Tanner's credentials were impeccable in the eyes of most black intellectuals and artists, for he had been lauded in the art capital of the world. Although he was considered by some to be a reactionary who had "divorced himself from the task of developing a statement which

11. *Ibid.*, p. 69.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 22.

reflected the crucial social problems of his time,"¹³ he was generally viewed as a hero who had overcome the system.

Thus, the legacy of the Harlem Renaissance included nationalism, primitivism, atavism, and, perhaps, "Tannerism." One could say that black art and culture were shaped during the 1930s not only by this legacy but also by the Great Depression and the aesthetics of the Regionalists and the American Scene painters. Yet if one overlooks the phenomenon of "double consciousness," then much of the tension relating to the black America of the thirties is minimized or misunderstood. Double consciousness, according to W. E. B. DuBois, is that peculiar sensation of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others.¹⁴ He refers to the relationship of black Americans to a socio-cultural system that they are a part of and yet apart from. As a result, they have had to contend with the changes of the society in general while also confronting the vagaries of discrimination. Since they are thus inextricably linked to the American majority, the concerns of black America must be seen in the context of the whole of American culture.

When the grim realities of the Depression replaced the Jazz Age, many Americans became disillusioned with the political/economic system. And, when the nation was found wanting because so many institutions and traditions had failed, there was a demand for change. The intelligentsia responded to the crisis with a new emphasis on social consciousness and a leftist leaning in politics. Yet as the discussion of the

nation's inadequacies continued, it became painfully clear there was no consensus about what was indeed American about America. It was discovered that "Americanism" could be defined just as readily along conservative or anti-conservative lines. One result of the turmoil was a conflict regarding the direction American art should take as the country began piecing together a new identity.

Some felt the solution was to support new alliances and new priorities. The small group of artists that clustered around Alfred Steiglitz (fig. 39) believed it was time to bring American art into the twentieth century by coming to grips with European modernism. This group railed against artistic provincialism and searched for individual styles that were abstract rather than representational. However, until the 1940s these artists and their works remained a distinct minority. During the Depression Americans became artistically more conservative and were generally suspicious of abstract art, partly because it seemed more ornamental than useful. It was thought to be some foreign import unsuited to the pragmatic American character. Even otherwise liberal politicians disdained abstract art for its lack of any moral or didactic content. Nevertheless, the artists' attempts to synthesize a new art from various European theories were eventually vindicated as their efforts coincided with the rapid world-wide economic and political shifts of the forties and fifties. However, conservative elements, both in and out of the art field, continued to resist those changes wherever they occurred.

The strongest reaction came from the Regionalists and the American Scene painters who endeavored to retain in their works an atavistic image of "a God-fearing, white-picket-fence America."¹⁵ The leading spokesman for the conservative viewpoint was Thomas H. Benton, who recanted his own "play with colored cubes and . . . aesthetic drivelings"¹⁶ and revolted "against the general cultural inconsequences of modern art."¹⁷ With Curry, Wood, Hopper, Marsh, and others he tried to counteract the European-inspired modernist leanings in American art by creating works that "glorified the traditional American values—self-reliance tempered with good neighborliness, independence modified by a sense of community, hard work rewarded by a sense of order and purpose."¹⁸

This "aesthetic of the ethic" no doubt accurately reflected the majority opinion since it was supported not only by Middletown and Middlebrow, but by the Art Students League, the Whitney Museum, *Art Digest*, the A.C.A. Gallery, and the *New York Post*, to name just a few. In this revival of realistic modes and anecdotal subject matter, the vices of society could be

13. Romare Bearden, quoted in Marcia Matthew, *Henry Ossawa Tanner: American Artist* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969), p. 251.

14. W. E. B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Fawcett Publication, 1961), p. 187.

15. Barbara Rose, *American Art since 1900: A Critical History* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1967), p. 115.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 120.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 121.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 115.

held up for ridicule and change, as its virtues could be presented for emulation; political as well as other groups seeking a utilitarian function for the arts found such works useful for their needs.

According to some astute observers of American art and life,¹⁹ the art of this crucial, self-conscious period was characterized by the advancement of American Scenes and Symbols, the formulation of the American Self-Portrait, and the expression of Reaction and Rebellion. These phrases recall those years when "Made in America" became a rallying cry for both white and black America.

Recent art historians have generally repudiated the Regionalists and most of the American Scene painters as being hopelessly reactionary and anachronistic. By the same token, black artists of the period who delved into mainstream social realism and commentary art have received similar treatment. These painters have had their works dismissed as "cheerless, harsh, haunted by a romantic nostalgia and addicted to the grotesque."²⁰ The same artists, sanctioned and validated during the 1930s, have also been accused of disclosing in their "graceless, unaesthetic" works the "spiritual vacancy behind the American success story." Sam Hunter, who has thus described them, is very specific about their faults:

*Pictorially, they were as limited, average and undistinguished as the humiliated landscape, broken down architecture and drab scenes they made their stock-in trade of their subject matter... the least attractive aspects of American life were presented with apology.*²¹

Nevertheless, what seemed deserving of opprobrium to white critics was not necessarily perceived in that light by black critics and artists. Margaret Just Butcher contends that the black minority achieved nearly universal recognition as a cultural force during the 1930s. She suggests that this occurred because black writers and artists tended to relate themselves to the common social protest rather than to racial protest only.²²

Alain Locke, who was also a proponent of American Scene art, found the 1930s especially worthwhile for the black artist since it was a time when "American art was rediscovering the Negro."

*The revolution in the attitude of the white American artist toward the [black] theme and subject is in certain respects highly significant. First, because it rests upon some subtly and slowly changing social attitudes which it reflects. Then, because it re-inforces that liberalization of public opinion in a subtle and powerful way. Finally, because as long as the [black] theme is taboo among white artists or cultivated in a derogatory way, a pardonable reaction tends to drive the [black] artist away from an otherwise natural interest in depicting the life of his own group.*²³

19. Barbara Rose, Oliver Larkins, and Sam Hunter.

20. Sam Hunter, *American Art of the Twentieth Century* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1972), p. 124.

21. Ibid.

22. Margaret Just Butcher, *The Negro in American Culture* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1967), pp. 224-25.

23. Alain Locke, *Negro Art: Past and Present* (Washington, D.C.: Associates in Negro Folk Education, 1936), p. 47.

He was referring specifically to the sympathetic treatment of black subjects by earlier artists of the Ashcan School such as Henri, Bellows, Luks, as well as Benton, Curry, Bloch, Marsh, and others. This was revolutionary to Locke because he knew very well that if white artists and their institutions made images of the black American legitimate then, ironically, it would not be long before the black artist would also accept himself as a proper subject. Indeed, Locke felt that the black artist had even more to gain than other American artists from the desire to create a native art independent from European influences and rooted in themes of the American scene.²⁴

Thus, one reason given by white critics for their condemnation of the general aesthetic climate of the 1930s is the same reason it has been lauded by black critics: the popularization of imagery derived from native American sources. It was especially important to black critics that these sources include black people and their activities. For, as Locke suggested, this would indicate that black people were being considered significant to the country. White critics tended to stress the importance of the art object over the role of the artist while black critics tended to do the reverse.

Although Locke used the word revolution to describe some of the changes in attitude of certain white artists of the 1930s, this change had begun gradually some years earlier. Interaction among black and white intellectuals and artists had been especially prevalent during the 1920s, and it was that period of the Jazz Age and the Harlem Renaissance that indirectly informed the aesthetics of

the black American in the 1930s.

The hard times brought on by the social and economic displacement of the Depression forced art and culture into a secondary status at best. Had it not been for the continued support of the Harmon Foundation and the introduction of the New Deal programs, aesthetics would have had little meaning, especially for black artists, because the "last-hired and first-fired" syndrome applied to art as well as to labor.

Nevertheless, the era that saw Joe Louis win the heavyweight boxing title and Bessie Smith die because of malign neglect also saw a government policy that left an indelible mark on the art of black America. The Public Works of Art Project and the Federal Art Project of the WPA were organized in 1933 with a grant of \$1,408,381.²⁵ It is not clear whether this support came from the suggestion of Edward Bruce—a banker, lawyer, and sometime painter who was a delegate at an international economic conference in London—or whether the impetus came from the protests of unemployed artists. The purpose of the project was to employ artists at craftsmen's wages to embellish public property, a socialistic approach to art that was unprecedented in the United States.

This program was not, of course, designed with the black artist in mind, but he benefited because it was implemented with a minimum of discrimination; participants were supposedly selected on the basis of their qualifications as artists and their need for employment. The subject matter assigned to artists was the American scene in all its phases. By 1934, 3,521 artists had created more

than 15,000 murals, sculptures, paintings, prints, drawings, and crafts that were all the property of the United States government. Much of this art was executed or placed in public buildings and parks.

Some black artists, buoyed by this temporary aid, deceived themselves by accepting it uncritically. Many welcomed the project simply as a way to survive for a while. Others mistakenly assumed that the bread lines, strikes, and demonstrations would at least modify the old system if not completely overturn it. The development of other New Deal programs seemed a promising indication that America was finally seeking social justice for all of its citizens. It also seemed encouraging that black artists were given the same opportunity as white artists and that they were asked to paint the American way of life. The tenor of the times also suggested that the artistic themes of the 1920s just might be extended to include a class *and* a race consciousness. This notion was further supported by the revolutionary success achieved by the Mexican muralists, by the Communist Party which encouraged nationalism by suggesting that black Americans were an oppressed nation within a nation, and by the popular acceptance of the Regionalists and American Scene painters.

Thus the climate that created the "socially inclined" artist also met the needs of black citizens, artists and non-artists alike, who not only

24. Ibid., p. 57.

25. The factual material regarding this program comes from Edward Bruce, quoted in *The Art Digest*, May 1, 1934, p. 32.

wanted to express their “Americanness” but were impatient to help effect social change. When Benton said that “no American art can come to those who do not live an American life, who do not have an American psychology and who cannot find in America justification of their lives,”²⁶ the black artist could feel, ironically, that he was perhaps the most American of all since he had not chosen other alternatives and almost always existentially viewed himself within the American context.

Such rhetoric necessarily resulted in a social realism that dominated American art of the 1930s. Most of the white artists of this period have been critically superseded by others who were committed to modernism and abstraction. For the black artists and critics who never came to grips with modernism (neither the European nor the American variety), the use of the work of art as primarily a vehicle for communicating a social message became almost universally accepted. Art that emphasized formal concerns was generally ridiculed by black leaders who knew little about aesthetic issues.

In assessing the artists of the 1930s in his essay “The Negro in Modern Art,” James Porter commented that he wished their “efforts at social criticism were more direct and accusatory—less concerned with day-dreaming or with symbolistic wishfulness. More gallic deftness and honesty of statement and less pretense of indifference or frustration. Overdramatizing the feeling of separateness from the mainstream of American life because of oversensitiveness to race discrimination is submission....”²⁷

If the role of the artist was to be a critic of society, as Porter suggested, this could hardly have been accomplished by the nonrepresentational systems favored by the formalists. On the other hand, a white critic, Barbara Rose, in evaluating the same period from a different viewpoint, maintains that “the American artist faced the problem of extricating his art from a debilitating provincialism as well as from the demands of leftist politics, which required that art serve a social purpose.”²⁸

Another white critic, Sam Hunter, chose as his hero from this period not the Regionalists nor the American Scene painters but Stuart Davis, who worked in an abstract and semi-abstract style. Hunter says, “Stuart Davis’ art... provided more refreshing answers in the quest for a native art than the various styles of romantic realism offered.... Throughout the period of reaction, in the twenties and thirties, Davis painted according to aesthetic principles far more strict and exacting than those of his contemporaries.”²⁹

If double consciousness permits the black American to see himself only through the eyes of others, perhaps the sociologist can explain why he tends to reflect the more conservative and traditional elements. Those who would have the least to gain by maintaining the status quo are, more often than not, the staunchest supporters of values long since abandoned by the leading thinkers of the majority culture. A classic example is Henry O. Tanner, who disdained the radicalism of the Impressionists, the Post-Impressionists, and other innovative artists in France, preferring the

academic haven of the salon. Since the Regionalists and American Scene painters seemed to have the official approval not only of the government through the WPA but also of museums, newspapers, art schools, and the public, it is understandable that they would exert the most profound influence on black artists. Artists like Marcel Duchamp and Man Ray were either unknown or dismissed as being irrelevant to the needs of the black community.

In 1934 Romare Bearden wrote a scathing diatribe against the “timidity,” the “mere rehashings,” and the “hackneyed and uninspired” work of the black artists. Disgusted that they had “evolved nothing original or native like the spiritual or jazz music” he suggested that their development had been slowed by three factors: (1) the lack of a valid standard of criticism; (2) hindrance from foundations and societies that were supposed to encourage them; and (3) a lack of a definite ideology or social philosophy to guide them.³⁰ However, according to Bearden one of the chief problems of the black artist was the lack of an appreciative critical audience.

Art should be understood and loved by the people. It should arouse and

26. Oliver Larkin, *Art and Life in America* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1960), p. 416.

27. James A. Porter, “The Negro in Modern Art,” in *The New Negro Thirty Years Afterward* (Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1955), p. 55.

28. Rose, *American Art since 1900*, p. 155.

29. Hunter, *American Art*, p. 162.

30. Romare Bearden, “The Negro Artist and Modern Art,” *Journal of Negro Life*, December 1934, pp. 371-72.

*stimulate their creative impulses The best art has been produced in those countries where the public most loved and cherished it We need some standard of criticism then, not only to stimulate the artist, but also to raise the cultural level of the people I am not sure just what form this system of criticism will take but I am sure that the [black] artist will have to revise his conception of art.*³¹

The lack of patronage was an obstacle to the development of an indigenous black art style not easily overcome. As Henry McBride of the *New York Sun* commented:

*There is no question but that the race is artistic, but the difficulty comes when we attempt to decide if that race is to speak for itself or for us. At once weighty problems confuse the issue. Art patronage, until just recently, at least, has come from the aristocracy. Is there a sufficient Negro aristocracy to support Negro geniuses or shall the Negro adopt himself to white necessities and so to speak, paint white.*³²

Eleanor Roosevelt expressed a similar concern while dedicating the South Side Art Center in Chicago: "I think we now realize here in this country that what we need to do is develop an audience for our artists of every kind . . . that the power to appreciate is often just as important as the power to actually create something. . . ." ³³

James Porter commented in 1943 that:

*The opportunities afforded Black painters and sculptors so far through the WPA Federal Arts Projects raise the hope that equal opportunities will soon appear through private and commercial patronage and that the prejudice and mistrust that have restricted the [black] artist and warped his milieu will be abolished.*³⁴

At this point it was obvious that patronage was essential if black artists were to realize their full potential. But no one had any immediate solutions, although Porter later chided the black press for their lack of support. He said that the black artist:

*. . . requires a discriminating, consistent and generous patronage. It is unfortunate that the Negro Press has done so little to advance the hopes and aspirations of the [black] artists or to influence the growth of educational opportunity. . . in the field of art. . . . Deprived of constructive art criticism and lacking other necessary incentive, the [black] artist can scarcely live much less create.*³⁵

Despite these seemingly insurmountable obstacles, the black painter "found his voice in the thirties." Artists like Douglas, Motley, Hayden, and Barthé who had established their reputations during the twenties continued to create their

interpretations of the black American scene under the auspices of the Art Projects. In the thirties Douglas continued to extract harmonic formal designs from scenes of lower-class black life in his *Aspects of Negro Life* murals painted for the New York Public Library. He elaborated on his clean, precise, decorative style with subtle color gradations, while the ambiguous spatial relations of forms that appear to be both flat and illusionistic remained. The formal structure of Douglas' mural style, distinct from that of his easel paintings, appears to have been obtained from having emptied, softened, and smoothed the forms of Analytical Cubism. The result is an intriguing blend of abstract construction with objective perception. His first notable works appeared as illustrations in *Crisis* magazine submitted at the invitation of W. E. B. DuBois. This association with DuBois led to the execution of many more illustrations and mural panels and Douglas successfully turned his palette to modernizing a style that reflected themes from African history. He designed jackets and plates for a variety of books by Countee Cullen, Alain Locke, Langston Hughes, and James Weldon Johnson. His best-known illus-

31. *Ibid.*, p. 372.

32. "The Negro Annual," *Art Digest*, May 15, 1934, p. 18.

33. *Magazine of Art*, May 7, 1941.

34. James A. Porter, *Modern Negro Art* (New York: Dryden Press, 1943. Reprint. New York: Arno Press, 1969), p. 133.

35. Porter, "The Negro in Modern Art," p. 55.

trations are those in the series he executed for Johnson's *God's Trombones*.

Richmond Barthé, unquestionably the leading black sculptor of the era, had his first New York solo exhibition in 1931. He worked in a romantic realist style that stressed a kind of surface illusionism rather than mass. His subjects ranged from simple, dignified genre and figure studies of black people, with an emphasis on portraiture, to public works on a heroic scale. Stylized, studied movements like those seen in dance were recurrent. Barthé's sculpture was less a statement of sculptural form than an affirmation of his people's physical and spiritual vitality.

The most interesting and promising style remained that of the neo-primitives, whose reputation was immeasurably enhanced by William H. Johnson, Horace Pippin, and Jacob Lawrence. Pippin and Lawrence were in the forefront of a group of "primitive" and "neo-primitive" artists that included Archibald Motley, Jr., Alan Crite, William Edmondson, Palmer Hayden, and Leslie Bolling.

The idea that non-professional painting had merit grew out of a contemporary art that contained certain features of primitiveness and spontaneous creation. This was acknowledged in the thirties by group exhibitions of American primitives and self-taught artists at The Newark Museum in 1930 and 1931 and at the Museum of Modern Art in 1939. Solo exhibitions at the Museum of Modern Art of self-taught artists included

John Kane in 1933 and William Edmondson in 1937.

Such validations of the primitive style could very well have influenced William H. Johnson to abandon his expressionistic style for the neo-primitive one. Johnson's introduction to art had come through cartoons in a local newspaper: "I began copying the humorous drawings in our newspapers, and the joy I derived from these may without a doubt be ascribed to the way we primitive people always adore caricatures."³⁶ From copying cartoons, his only means of training at the time, he developed the ability to tell a story in a picture and one can see the effect of the cartoon on his work throughout his career.

After studying under George Luks at the National Academy of Design, Johnson journeyed to France in 1926 where he produced a series of still lifes and portraits. While in Europe he continued to work in a rather flat, impressionistic style, exploring color and form in a manner that proved him a painter of remarkable perception. What was to be of utmost importance to his European study was his contact with the works of Cézanne, Rouault, Soutine, and Munch. In the work of the latter two he found the exaggerated emotional forms that would play an important role in the style that distinguished his work and caused him to be singled out as one of the most versatile painters of the period.

When Johnson returned to New York in 1943 his style of painting immediately became more direct and expressively primitive (fig. 40). He

began painting religious themes, speaking through them to black people. At the Johnson exhibition in Copenhagen in 1947 a Danish critic saw *Come Unto Me Little Children*, an oil from the New York primitive period, and called it "a far cry from ecclesiastical art, which in Europe has become flat and preoccupied."³⁷

One must realize when viewing Johnson's paintings that the artist was not discarding all that he knew about principles and theories of art. Rather he was attempting to unite them with the direct approach to a subject that he had discovered in African and European primitive art. The neo-primitive approach is closely related to the conceptualization basic to most African art. Instead of trying to imitate nature, African artists (and the true primitive) seek to define their *idea* of the thing, molding its image in conformity with their definition of it. They must rely on their creative instincts rather than formula and conventions, and when they are successful their work achieves a direct expression of their personal vision of the world.

Horace Pippin was a true primitive and as such his work is self-contained and scarcely affected by the culture of his time. In the most successful of his works such as *Holy Mountain, No. 3* (cat. no. 77); *Christmas Morning*

36. David C. Driskell, "Some Observations on the Life and Work of William H. Johnson" (Paper delivered at the 58th Annual Meeting of the College Art Association, Washington, D.C., January 1970).

37. Ibid.

Breakfast (cat. no. 76); and *Domino Players* (cat. no. 75), he brings the image to a heightened, surrealistic pitch.

Jacob Lawrence, a master of design in the neo-primitive style, studied first with Charles Alston and Henry Bannarn, later with Refregier, Sol Wilson, and Eugene Morley at the American Artists School. He worked with the Federal Art Project and early in his career received a Rosenwald fellowship. Lawrence also admits to having been influenced by Orozco, Daumier, Goya and Brueghel. "They are forceful. Simple. Human. . . . Then I like Arthur Dove. I like to study the design to see how the artist solves his problems, how he brings his subjects to the public."³⁸

Although Lawrence was a thoroughly trained artist the characteristics of his style—simplification, narration, schematization, condensation—are frequently seen in the works of non-professionals. Despite the similarities Lawrence differs from a purely primitive painter in that his distortions are not arrived at accidentally but are deliberately cultivated as a means of creating another view of reality. He seems interested not in perfect form but in perfect distortion which penetrates through mere outward appearance to the essence. His most immediate artistic ancestors quite evidently came from the graphic world of magazine and newspaper illustration: the cartoon, the poster, the comic strip, the caricature. By exaggerating the essential features of a subject,

caricatures produce a likeness that is truer than mere imitation.³⁹ As Lawrence's work proves, it is not proximity to reality that gives value to a work of art, but its nearness to the artist's psychic life. His work is tough, urbane, unsentimental. His stock-in-trade is strong, hard-edged shapes of unpredictable, unmodulated, intense color. Everything rests firmly on the surface of the picture in a non-illusionistic space that is impeccably designed (cat. no. 164). "It seems that his achievement rests not in his iconography, his style, or in the content of his works, but in his idiosyncratic blending of the three into a symbolic mode of expression synthesized in caricature."⁴⁰

Locke was delighted in 1940 to observe that the "intimate, and original documentation of [black] life" in the 1930s had not led into a "back water inlet of racist art, but on the contrary, led out to the mainstream of contemporary American art."⁴¹ The thirties had provided what he observed as a new conception of the place of black people in American

38. Elizabeth McCausland, "Jacob Lawrence," *Magazine of Art*, November 1945, p. 254.

39. Ernst Kris and Ernst Gombrich, "The Principles of Caricature," *British Journal of Medical Psychology* 18 (1938): 319-41.

40. The ideas concerning the relation of Lawrence to caricature are from Allan M. Gordon, "Cultural Dualism in the Themes of Certain Afro-American Artists" (Doctoral dissertation, Ohio University, Athens, 1969), pp. 127-33.

41. Locke, *The Negro in Art*, p. 9.

culture. He was convinced that for the artist this could be the realization of a spiritual freedom. He said, however, "that freedom can never be actually realized without the adequate public support and recognition. With respect to both of these, the [black] artist's position is still precarious."⁴² The artist's position was to remain precarious for the next three decades and was undermined, ironically, by those forces put into operation to improve the plight of all black people.

The forties saw the demise of the Federal Art Projects, the publication of Locke's *The Negro in Art* (1940) and of Porter's *Modern Negro Art* (1943), the rise of Abstract Expressionism, and significant gains in civil rights for black Americans. The world had been made safe for democracy and now black people wanted democracy to be made safe for them. The elimination of racial restrictions that had begun in the closing years of World War II was greatly accelerated in the postwar years. The climate created by the leadership of President Harry Truman, the efforts of the civil rights organizations, and court decisions caused substantial gains to be made for black people in the areas of social and civil justice. Encouraged by these hopeful signs, civil rights leaders began to intensify their drive to obtain complete equality for all Americans.

How did black artists fit into this atmosphere? Their "precariousness" was intensified when the public support from the WPA programs dried up. But several large group

shows for black artists were organized, including *American Negro Art: Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, at the Downtown Gallery in New York in 1942; *The Art of the American Negro, 1851-1940*, in Chicago in 1940, an exhibition sponsored by the McMillen Corporation in New York; and *The Negro Artist Comes of Age*, in Albany in 1945. These shows undoubtedly resulted from exposure given black artists during the WPA days, but they could hardly be considered an adequate substitute for the government's support, nor were they intended to be. They simply assuaged the consciences of those who felt "something should be done." At best they provided an introduction for new and younger artists and a place to exhibit other than a settlement house, a library, or a YMCA. Much more important and lasting, in terms of patronage, was the Annual Atlanta University Exhibition organized by Hale Woodruff in 1942. Not only was it a national exhibition sponsored by and for black artists but the policy of purchasing the award-winning paintings provided the core of a significant collection of black art.

But the real crisis in black art had been pinpointed as early as 1934 by Romare Bearden when he observed among black artists the lack of a "definite ideology or social philosophy." The vogue for blackness during the twenties that was

42. Ibid., p. 10.

encouraged by the white avant-garde had allowed the artist to express himself in a limited, "dark-skinned" way. The 1930s realism of the American Scene painters, with its government sanction and its overtones of social consciousness, had been greeted enthusiastically by black artists who had promptly proceeded to create their version of the black American scene.

In retrospect, it becomes much clearer why discussions about whether it was better to be a "Negro artist" and develop a racial art or to be an American artist who was a Negro were not resolved either in the twenties or thirties and why this irresolution contributed to the crisis of the forties. The answer is simple. Black Americans for the most part have been unable to view themselves outside an American context. The majority of black Americans have consistently attempted to become as much as possible like other (white) Americans and have resented and strongly resisted being thought of as different. The white critic George Schuyler, in refuting Langston Hughes, once went so far as to say that the black American is "merely a lampblack Anglo-Saxon."⁴³ It is no wonder that any theory or philosophy that suggested separation, whether in art or elsewhere, was promptly attacked. Such ideas appeared to be a threat or delay to integration. Therefore it was not only virtually impossible to develop an aesthetic

based on a usable African past, but it was almost impossible even to discuss such concepts seriously. To say, as Hughes did, that the black artists were going to write and paint about black people whether white people liked it or not was in effect hollow, especially since no sustaining patronage had emerged from the black community.

The other leading spokesmen, Locke and Porter, did not anticipate any artistic crisis since both were optimistic, with reservations, that democracy could be made to include black people. Porter disdained any suggestions that a "black art" might be developed simply by studying or copying African sources. While he did not dismiss the power of African art as an influence, he insisted that the solution to the black artist's problem could not be found in slavish imitation of African art surfaces. In 1943 he criticized certain black intellectuals (Negro apologists he called them) for extolling "African Negro art as the 'art of the noble savage', justifying an alliance of art with primitive mentality, and a naive perspective with true achievement,"⁴⁴ and felt vindicated by the fact that their admonitions to imitate the ancestral arts had not produced a coherent aesthetic program. Instead, it had fostered "academicism and

43. George Schuyler, "The Negro Art Hokum," *The Nation* (June 16, 1926), p. 662.

44. Porter, *Modern Negro Art*, p. 99.

tended moreover to confuse the special geometric forms of African sculpture with specific racial feeling."⁴⁵

In 1940 Locke had written this appraisal:

*More and more a sober realism is to be noted which goes beneath the mere superficial picturesqueness of the Negro color, form and feature and a penetrating social vision which goes deeper than the surface show and jazzy tone and rhythm of Negro folk-life. Much of our contemporary art is rightly an art of social analysis and criticism, touching the vital problems of religion, labor, housing, lynching, unemployment, social reconstruction and the like. For today's beauty cannot afford to be merely pretty with sentiment and local color; it must be solid and instructive with an enlightening truth.*⁴⁶

Thus Locke and Porter continually equated "black art" with "social analysis and criticism," not abstraction. But the loss of public and critical support for "mainstream" art left the black artist with a dilemma: should he continue to document black life and an unjust system or should he direct himself to purely formal concerns?

Two artists, Eldzier Cortor and Hughie Lee-Smith, appeared to offer the most provocative alternative to the "neo-primitive" hegemony without reverting to academicism.

Cortor used figures as metaphors for his own sense of alienation and estrangement. He favored an introspective female figure who contemplated her own predicament and related to no one (cat. no. 158). Often, when there was more than one, his figures became isolated, distorted caricatures, unreal demons in a fantasy land.

One writer has said about Hughie Lee-Smith that his "penetrating but quietly painted, statements on urban desolation and transition are so true of city life anywhere in the West that he must be regarded as an artist of world significance."⁴⁷ An inspection of Lee-Smith's works reveals that he is concerned with the relationship of urban man to his environment and to other members of society. His paintings (cat. nos. 150, 151) possess an enigmatic surrealistic quality that connects him with Edward Hopper and Giorgio de Chirico. Like the work of these two artists, Lee-Smith's illusionistic scenes often impart a melancholy emptiness. His most frequent motifs are a vast sky; an industrial structure in the distance; an empty landscape; a brilliant light; menacing shadows. They create a dreamlike wasteland, a space that seems to threaten the figures who

45. *Ibid.*, p. 106.

46. Locke, *The Negro in Art*, p. 10.

47. Cedric Dover, *American Negro Art* (Greenwich, Conn.: New York Graphic Society, 1960), p. 48.

appear romantic and melancholy as they hopelessly attempt to communicate. Whether he employs one or more, his figures always express hopelessness, alienation, estrangement from other human beings, and they are forced to act out puzzling, futile roles within a malevolent environment.

Once again it was a lack of critical attention and interpretation that diminished the importance of what Cortor and Lee-Smith were doing in relation to what black artists were trying to accomplish. No viable aesthetic was developed among black artists between 1930 and 1950 because black leaders and intellectuals did not take the artists nor their art seriously. Unfortunately, neither did many black artists. It was assumed that art was trivial, peripheral, while politics, economics, and religion were of central importance.

Black art, unlike black music, was never valued purely for its power to captivate the spectator. Instead the art object always served as a sign of some other cognitive interest, and could be neither pleasurable nor exciting unless it was "socially significant." It had to be treated not as art but as a lesson in social history or an instrument of social change.

By assigning a function to art that it might not be able to perform, this attitude caused artists to try to synthesize their work within the framework of known, familiar experiences. Any approach that was removed from ordinary experience (abstraction is a prime example) was rejected. Art could not be autonomous, independent, self-sufficient.

Value was seen not in formal organization, but rather in the literal depiction of objects, persons, and events of "real life." This attitude was reinforced in the late 1960s when urban artists formed cohesive groups such as Afri-Cobra (African Commune of Bad Relevant Artists) to create work in a style reflecting the mural arts. The subject matter of black art became all important: the closer art resembled "real life," the more one could "learn" from it. As a result the imaginative, sensuous totality of a work was neglected, if perceived at all. Subsequently, the value of the art depended on how moral, praiseworthy, or politically valid the subject was.

This explains the ire of DuBois and others who thought there was real danger in the twenties penchant for portraying the "Negro character in the underworld." It also explains why Porter criticized those artists who attempted to capture in their work the "exotica," as defined by white critics. Since art is evaluated in terms of its subject matter, something outside the work—the model—becomes central to its meaning. This attitude has fostered among too many black artists the notion that a "good" work of art is differentiated from a "bad" work of art essentially by its subject matter and its imitation of a "real life" model. Thus the black artist and his audience have inadvertently accepted and acted upon premises that are more pertinent to ethics than aesthetics.

However even within the academic, realist tradition the genius of an artist can elevate him above the literal. To this end, the art of Charles

White has captured the beauty of blackness as seen in the expressions and daily activities of his people (cat. no. 174). More than any other academic artist he has searched the souls of black folks, registering in his supremely successful realism the unique qualities he has found. He overcomes the problem of using his art literally to mirror social injustices by portraying people whose joys are experienced even in periods of suffering. No one needs the revelation of a secret code to understand Charles White's art even though he uses black content in his work. He reveals those fundamentals of truth known by all who believe man to be "the measure of all things."

Not only White but many other black artists have mastered academic techniques while expressing their ideas in contemporary forms. John Rhoden, Walter Williams, Edward Wilson, Elizabeth Catlett, and Earl Hooks, to mention a few, are among the many seasoned artists whose works explore the dimensions of form that reveal the dynamics of a black aesthetic.

Romare Bearden has articulated on several occasions those theories of art that he believes to be basic to the establishment of a black aesthetic. While he has accepted African art as an element in his own work, he has not allowed his art to become overlaid with the saccharine "right-on" Africanized forms created by many of the young artists of the 1960s. The young black artists who resorted to imitative forms that relied heavily on the surface qualities and iconography of African art were chastised by the

critics. In 1946, long before it was fashionable to discuss the concept of black identity in relation to African heritage, Bearden wrote:

It would be highly artificial for the Negro artist to attempt a resurrection of African culture in America. The period between the generations is much too great, and whatever creations the Negro has fashioned in this country have been in relation to his American environment. Culture is not a biologically inherited phenomenon. . . . Modigliani, Picasso, Epstein and other modern artists studied African sculpture to reinforce their own design concepts. This would be perfectly appropriate for any Negro artist who cared to do the same. The critic asks that the Negro stay away from the white man's art, but the true artist feels that there is only one art—and it belongs to all mankind.⁴⁸

Since the 1950s it has become increasingly evident that some of the issues central to the art of the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s have not received the kind of critical analysis needed to separate aesthetic from non-aesthetic concerns. Such a distinction has not yet been established; if anything, there has been a return to placing the artist at the service of a movement. And if artist and political activist are considered one, the black artist must link his work to the struggle for his liberation. Regrettably, the artist has been intimidated by the implication that his art is trivial unless it is politically oriented.

The black community must come

to realize that art can have intrinsic value, and act accordingly. Otherwise, it will limit its artists to reproducing when they could define and reveal; to dealing in the anecdotal when they could discover and express truths that go beyond temporal values. Only when we recognize the historical patterns of isolation and accept the responsibility of supporting those artists who express themselves in a universal language of form will black American artists be seen as major contributors to the art of this country.

48. Romare Bearden, "The Negro Artist's Dilemma," in *Critique: A Review of Contemporary Art*, ed. David Lashak, I, no. 2 (November 1946): 20.